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Jeff Wall, Sydney MCA

Jeff Wall's place in the realm of exalted postmodern and post-photographic practitioners is well entrenched. Given his reputation, a mandatory tour of some of his finest work was bound for Australia at some point, and the present collection graced the National Gallery of Victoria, Australian National Gallery, and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney. The exhibition at the MCA contained about 25 *meisterworks*, the majority of which were large format photographic transparencies in light boxes. These were supplemented by a few colour and black and white images in various sizes. The selection covered the chronological terrain of the late 1970s through to 2010, and provided instructive insights into his stellar oeuvre.

The large transparencies resembled the grand salon paintings of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, much as Wall perpetuates a 'grand tradition' his teeth were cut on mastering a postmodern attitude towards photography during the 'crisis of authorship' phase in the late 1970s and 1980s. This included the view that the photograph was not an instance of neutral verisimilitude as much as it was an ideological element in a wider pictorial constellation of social messages. Artists like Barbara Kruger responded to these insights by producing directly political works, but Wall was attracted to the conceptual facets of photography as a communicative and aesthetic system. This led him to examine, explore and experiment with the intellectual, formal and stylistic components of photography. He recognizes photography's illusionistic parameters, but rather than critiquing this condition he revels in its conceptual and aesthetic possibilities. This combination of post-conceptual and aesthetic smarts, and his desire to exploit rather than attack the illusory power of the photographic image has ensured his influence on the ensuing generation of post-photographers.

The impact of postmodern thought on Wall's artistic vision is conspicuous in the way he often deliberately stages his subject matter to make something appear 'natural', when it is obviously a product of artistic invention. His conceptual themes are therefore almost entirely dedicated to exploring the function of illusion and artifice in image making. His appropriation of landscapes, streetscapes, still lives, and especially 'genre painting' (scenes from everyday life) is also in keeping with the postmodern and post-photographic mining of art history's style options.

The Destroyed Room (1979) is one of Wall's early forays into appropriated 'history painting', and is based on the tumultuous action of Eugene Delacroix's *Death of Sardanopaulus* (1827). This portrayal of a woman's trashed bedroom is technically precise and is rendered in crystal clear detail. It shows a discombobulated mattress and table, as well as a sprawling mess of dresses, shirts, sunglasses and jewelry (resembling the phalange of prostrate harem beauties and murderous assassins seen in the Delacroix), which have been flushed out of cabinet drawers and the like. Yet, amidst this chaos Wall interposes a tightly constrained diagonal that sweeps across the picture plane and holds the composition firmly in place. This diagonal also generates a seductive balance between horizontal and vertical lines, and is framed by a

decussated window and doorway. Despite appearances this is a disciplined image that has been arranged with fastidious care and illustrates the artist's use of the mimetic pretensions of photography to control and master his subject matter. His famous 1993 work *A sudden gust of wind (after Hokusai)* is another homage to past artists; in this instance, a work by Ukiyo-e art maestro Hokusai Katsushika. Wall updates Hokusai's image of Japanese peasants caught in the wind gust with modern exemplars, and rearranges Hokusai's composition by replacing the zigzagging line of sight (from the original) with a frontal, loaded horizontal perspective that follows the river and draws the viewer's gaze into the pictorial field. This work follows the postmodern love of citation, but his insertion of exquisite and minute detail, and its descriptive richness, transports this photographic image into a painterly dimension.

Wall is a master technician of photographic, formal and iconographic elements, and technical and formal strategies dominate his oeuvre. This lends a clinical aspect to his work and he tends to portray people as little more than compositional elements, or theatrical props. He doesn't spare himself in this regard, as seen in the uncanny *Double self-Portrait* (1979). This austere work represents a prescient embrace of the on-coming digital (post-photographic) era. The artist seems wary and anxious, perhaps expressing the ontological uncertainty of selfhood in an era of the simulacrum. The doubling of self also presages the clone, a new obsession in a DNA-centric world exemplified in novels like David Rorvik's *In His Image: The Cloning of a Man*, and realized in living form by the cloning of the Dolly the sheep some five years later.

Adrian Walker, artist, drawing from a specimen in a laboratory in the Dept. of Anatomy at the University of British Columbia, Vancouver (1992) is a highly organized and descriptive work. The long-winded title reinforces the analytical and descriptive dimensions of the artist's task, which is undertaken by the protagonist who draws an old and shriveled arm in a science laboratory. The laboratory resembles the artist's studio in the sense that both environments foster creation, invention and resolution (creativity is also symbolised by the children's crayons). The placement of Cervantes' book *Don Quixote* on the desk is also not coincidental. Quixote was the great idealist, the dreamer, and his spirit seems to establish a dialogue with Walker's pensive pose as he attempts to aestheticise and faithfully reproduce what is before his eyes (like many photographers).

A view from an apartment (2004-5) is another masterly work characterised by sparkling precision and subtle negotiations between the themes of order and disorder. This everyday domestic scene shows two women in an apartment interior and seems like a stilted version of Jean-Baptiste Greuze's 18th century genre paintings. It is set up like a *mise en scène* with two 'actors' – a woman ironing and folding clothes, and another woman who sits in a chair reading a magazine – performing their roles. They are somewhat lifeless and seem to function primarily as compositional holders, and symbols, for the woman on the left represents *order* (as she irons and folds ruffled clothes), while her counterpart on the right is relaxed and lounges amongst a *disordered* heap of papers, magazines, cups and plates on a coffee table. The sophisticated

composition contains recurring horizontals that are enforced by the long length windows through which one can see parallel power lines, and beyond these, Vancouver's flat rooflines and the platform of an oil tanker that leads to horizontal crane shafts in the far distance. The horizontal 'theme' also permeates the room's interior as with the accumbent bookshelves at the extreme left. The bookshelves help frame this side of the image while a lamp fulfills a similar task on the right side. The many reflections in the image also constitute a deft reference to art and illusion. There are two light reflections in the main window, other reflections on the inert TV screen and light switch, reflections of light that comes through the windows and rest on the floor, and the light that passes through the glass bottle at the lower right. These may attest to the notion of the photographer as the master and manipulator of light.

Photographs such as *Apartment*, *Sudden Gust of Wind*, and *Adrian Walker*, artist are all meticulous post-production digital montages or 'hybrid' forms, and are developed by grafting disparate images to form a coherent picture. This way of working demonstrates his idea of the photographer as a 'farmer': someone who cultivates and aggregates diverse visual components that derive from observation, imagination, and memory. These photographs can thus be described as 'filmic paintings' in the way in which they are rendered over a period of time, rather than being the product of instantaneous depiction. The contrived manner of such images and their aesthetic effects conveys the idea that a photograph need not be a direct document or referent of actual events in the world, but can be an autonomous visual object constructed on its own internal terms.

Wall is also affiliated with more traditional photographic roles such as that which he describes as the 'hunter'. This is a more spontaneous process where the photographer identifies a scene in the world that is of sufficient interest to warrant being instantly 'captured' on record. This approach was represented in the exhibition's smaller studies, such as *Just washed* (1997), an image of a dirty rag that has been cleaned in a washing machine and is held up for display. The idea of washing something that is dirty reiterates Wall's abiding interest in the binary clash of cleanliness/dirt, and may also refer to the filtering and aesthetic powers of art to transform its subject. Other studies included impromptu street scenes shot in Vancouver such as *Clipped branches* (1999) and *A sapling held by a post* (2000).

More ambitious 'grand photography' is represented by *Untangling* (1994) and *Dressing Poultry* (2007); works that are rich in metaphor and contain allegorical allusions. *Untangling* is a complex and formidable example of photographic craftsmanship and touches on universal and existential themes. It shows a perplexed workman in overalls attempting to disentangle a veritable Gordian knot of tangled rope. There are a number of contrasts here including a disorderly splay of rope in the foreground that is set against an orderly background of shelves that hold a multitude of machine parts that are being examined by another worker. A mirific aspect of the image is the sophisticated aesthetic treatment of the rope with its organic flowing lines and exquisite bluish hues that animate it to great effect. The work also proposes allegorical notions about

humanity's need to control and create order from disorder. This is expressed by via organizing and categorizing objects and phenomena to make sense of the world and to re-shape it in our own image.

Wall is not renown for a humorous approach to art but *Dressing Poultry* (2007) is imbued with a considerable dose of the sardonic. This portrays the interior of a shed that is being used for a home or family business dedicated to plucking and stripping chicken carcasses. At the right side of the picture two women stand at a table eviscerating chicken cadavers. The woman to the left is laughing, as if responding to a joke. One imagines she may be amused by the incongruity of being engaged in a rather macabre task while chatting about everyday affairs. This air of grim humour is reinforced by the "Grimm's" box that rests on a chair at the left foreground. Wall's fascination with tools (seen in *Untangled*) is again on show as drills, bicycles, hammers and other implements adorn the space, as does a de-feathering machine that disgorges a mass of feathers and whose refuse is not for the squeamish. There seem to be other allusions to the chicken manufacturing industry, including a box at the apex of the room that is labelled "Putnam Fadeless Dyes". In combination with the pink fibre glass mats that lined the back of the room I was reminded of KFC's famous chicken nuggets, which are produced from compressed pink chicken flesh and are then dyed white to make them more appealing and 'natural'.

This exhibition revealed how Jeff Wall has used the crisis of photography's documentary traditions to develop an effective and highly aestheticized practice that aspires to the grand image making of earlier epochs. To this end he relies on the great mastery of his medium via 'technique', which was the means by which the reputations of earlier masters like Velazquez, Titian and Leonardo were established. Wall is thus an artist of great ambition and not a little pretension, but one can't help but admire his highly refined aesthetic and formidable technical expertise.